Book Review

Rainforest Restoration Manual for South-Eastern Australia. Bill Peel (2010). CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne. Softcover, 336 pp, Numerous colour photographs and black & white illustrations; plus CD. ISBN 9780643094710. $120.00 AUD.

Restoration ecology is a difficult, albeit popular pastime in Australia. Many well meaning people devote time, energy and money in attempting to return local vegetation patches to some semblance of pre-European grandeur. Most practitioners learn as they go, or absorb the general principals from others and there have been few published guides on how to go about it.

The current offering is marketed as the "definitive guide to the recovery and restoration of ….rainforests from south-eastern Queensland to Tasmania". Yet, the same spiel narrows this down further to between "Durras Mountain in New South Wales and the Otways in Victoria".

The book includes ten chapters, namely: Background to rainforest restoration; Understanding your rainforest and applying first aid; Your rainforest and ecological context; Immediate actions and site planning; Choosing the method of restoration; Resources; Project planning; Project implementation; What is success in restoration; Maintenance and ongoing ecological management. Restoration ecology in Australia has morphed into a strange mix of principals from the field of conservation biology combined with elements of folklore and philosophy and this is reflected throughout the book. The author states that the "essence of ecological restoration is to understand the concept of ecological resilience". Overall it can be stated that this is a belief or practicality based, rather than scientifically orientated guide, squarely aimed at the lay reader. There are many statements dressed up as facts, but if you want more than you have to load the CD and look at the references for what they are worth, although Wikipedia seems to loom large throughout.

Decisions made by restoration practitioners may echo down through the years, so from a conservation biology perspective, there are a few key areas that should be discussed in a text such as this. The extensive index does not list words such as dispersal, genetics, pollination or population, though "provenance" is mentioned in passing on p. 45 and "keystone species" on three pages. Intriguing indexing entries leads one to "canopy decapitation" and "work variations". Dispersal is covered here and there (e.g. p. 107–108); so the basics are there – just the indexing is poor.

This book does quite extensively cover the effects of predicted climate change and how this will affect the principals and maintenance of restoration plantings. Also well covered are the process of applying for funding and how this is managed and allocated for particular projects. Perhaps most intriguing is the detail given to the correct "rainforest restoration method", even with a taxonomic key to determine which one to use. Much of south-eastern Australia is an ecological basket case where little or nothing is left of the original rainforest vegetation outside of conservation reserves, so this may well be the best way to approach things. This contrasts to the subtropics and tropics where large tracts or numerous remnants still persist and systems are perhaps easier to recreate or enhance.

Although this is an interesting book, it is hard to dive into and one needs to read it from beginning to end to gather the maximum benefit. As with the book on palms (reviewed elsewhere this journal number), CSIRO Publishing has produced a text with a worthless thin card cover that will disintegrate after a few trips out in a vehicle or a backpack to a work site.

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